

7. The learning congregation

An offer that is attractive to outsiders

Many congregations offer training and teaching. They offer all sorts of gatherings centred on a wide variety of subjects. There are lectures, discussion evenings, courses. Would it be possible to make this offer a missionary one, accessible, relevant and without thresholds, to outsiders?

A number of suggestions

- Organise meetings centred on subjects that can be interesting to everyone, such as 'life after death', 'senseless violence', 'relationships' or 'alcohol abuse'. (Look for a subject for which there is an interest in the neighbourhood). Invite local organisations and speakers. The police officer can tell the audience something about his or her experiences with violence, the GP about stress. Make it an evening of around the table discussion. Experts give their opinion, but the participants get their say as well. Christians and people of other faiths or none all get an opportunity to express their points of view.
- Organise lectures that are interesting to a wider public than just church goers. How about questions people may have with regard to faith and the church. 'Why is there so much suffering when God is love?' 'Are Christians against sex?' 'Creation and/or evolution?' 'Christianity and other religions, how do they relate to each other?' The lectures can lead to a debate, whereby you might get somebody with a different opinion [from the speaker] to respond. Try also to find subjects that might interest young people. Involve them.
- For a change use a different location other than the church building, because this can constitute a threshold. In the local library, the pub on a Saturday afternoon (with a drink after the meeting)? A school hall?
- Many churches complain that it is difficult to get publicity. An evening with a good subject, aimed at outsiders is interesting copy for many door-to-door papers.
- Do not pounce on the outsiders when they arrive, but make sure that general information about the church is available. And a possible follow-up offer for this evening.
- There are many courses that can be interesting and accessible to people outside the church. There are Christian faith orientation courses (see model 8), but also marriage courses that help people build up their relationship, or courses about bringing up children.
- What is on offer for people who are looking for more? People joining the church need a small group where they can ask questions where they are not regarded as 'stupid'. It appears that starting up small house groups can be of great importance to these people. In the safety and seclusion of the small circle people have the courage to ask their questions. This is a challenge to congregation members! Do we people an opportunity to speak, are they given space to do so and do we have the courage to learn from them? A group in which a newcomer is 'preached to' is

- not hospitable. (For possibilities and material see also model 2. You can also visit the website for material.)
- The minister is of course not the only one to play a part in this learning process. You can invite outside speakers. Some congregations have many professional managers among their members. There are congregation members who are willing and able to share their knowledge and experience. There are courses and manuals for discussion leaders.
 - You could modernise the classic Sunday afternoon ‘instruction service’. Here too you could invite outside speakers: council member, GP, social worker, the headmaster of the nearby comprehensive. It is important to have interactive moments (opportunities to ask questions, for the audience to respond to each other).

Do not assume that outsiders are not interested in robust material. That will depend on your target group. Challenging bible studies, in-depth exegeses and theological reflection can be interesting to people outside the church as well. The Revd. Van Nieuwpoort in the Thomas Church in Amsterdam organises ‘bible reading for beginners’ - not a discussion group but a course for those who want to learn to read the bible. See www.thomaskerk.nl

Possible approach for the church council

- The church council opts for the ‘learning congregation’. In cooperation with the Learning and Training committee they have a look at what is on offer. How can this offer be adapted to make it more suitable for outsiders. Is there anything that can be left out? And what are the new starts we can make?
- Ask some interested people, friends or acquaintances who are not church members for information. What are the subjects they care about? What would tempt them to come along? What are they interested in? Do not just ask for their ideas but also make some suggestions of your own. This might lead them to think of other subjects.
- When selecting a Christian faith orientation course it is important to choose a course that is suitable for your congregation and the possible guest. See also model 8 for more detail about this.
- House groups or meeting groups are started. Try to find discussion leaders who are able to create an atmosphere of security and space.

- Do not forget about deepening the faith: a challenging course, theological deepening.
- Communication and PR are of course very important. In this context see model 4.
- Congregation members are involved in a. the invitation, b. the preparations (getting the room ready, coffee, cake, atmosphere, hospitality), c. making folders and d. preparing meals, if applicable.